

## THE FIRST COUNCIL MEETING AT JERUSALEM.

The Asserted Authority for all Subsequent Conferences, Annual Meetings and Legislative Bodies Where Creeds and Disciplines are Manufactured.

A BRIEF INVESTIGATION OF THE CAUSE AND RESULT OF THE MEETING, SHOWING HOW GREATLY THIS ACTION HAS BEEN MISUNDERSTOOD, WHEN IT IS QUOTED AS AN AUTHORITY FOR THE INTOLERANCE AND EXCLUSIVENESS THAT HAVE SO OFTEN DISGRACED MODERN PRO-FESSED CHRISTIAN BODIES.

BY NOSAM.

Soon after the return of Paul and Barnabas from their missionary tour, a controversy arose in the church at Antioch concerning the Gentile converts. Many Jewish Christians urged that these new disciples must become Jews, and observe the whole ceremonial law, thus making Christianity a mere branch of Judaism. After a long argument on this vital question, on which the whole future of the church was at stake, it was agreed to send a deputation to Jerusalem, led by Paul and Barnabas, for the decision of the apostles. There the subject was again debated, and it was resolved to send a letter to the Gentile converts declaring their freedom from all rites and burdens distinctively Jewish. The "result" was as follows:

"Forasmuch we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, *Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law; to whom we gave no such commandment:*

For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things;

That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well."

When the decree of the council was sent forth, we see in consequence of it in an immediate advance of the greatest importance on the part of the Christian faith. The great centres of Greek and Gentile life were entered and captured for God. The "result" itself, which had so great an effect on the spread of Christianity, commands our admiration for its wisdom and spirit.

Now let us first notice the relation of Christianity to Judaism. The law had its day of usefulness. It educated for the gospel, and was preparatory to it. The history of the church may well be divided into certain epochs. The institution of a new era of advanced thought, always made trouble with those who were attached to old systems and customs. The institution of Christianity was no exception to the rule. There was a day when the Law was useful and necessary. Now that day was past. Onward! Forward! Excelsior! is God's cry. Large numbers of Gentiles had been gathered into the church away out in Cyprus, in Pisidia, in Lycaonia. This reached the ears of those who were contending for the Law. And they ask: How were all these admitted into the church? By what door? The answer comes, "the door of faith." Acts 14:27. At once these Judaizers (as they were called) said that would not do; they must come in by another door: "Except ye be circumcised and keep the law, ye cannot be saved."

Christ was declared to be the end of the law to every one that believeth, and the apostle to the Gentiles said, "He is not a Jew which is one outwardly." To many the Law was an intolerable yoke of bondage. True, many of the Jewish Christians chose, from long habit, to remain observers of the old customs. But they did so more out of affectionate veneration for the past than because they supposed there was any spiritual merit in it.

The Gentiles, not being born and reared within the Jewish faith, could not so practise the customs of the old Law. For them the practice would be both irksome and also liable to lead to the error that salvation was dependent on these observances. Since the human heart is inclined to seek the starting point in self rather than in God, in doing rather than in receiving, in work rather than in grace, those old customs would prove a snare, as by them

men would be gradually beguiled into thinking that salvation was achieved through them. Against the danger the apostles, and especially Paul, most carefully and jealously guarded.

Now let us look at the *tolerant spirit* displayed. It seems strange to have such an example of toleration, when we consider the antecedents of the men who displayed it. They were Jews, of a most bigoted race. From earliest childhood they had been taught to regard themselves as God's peculiar people, and to value the Jewish rites and customs—circumcision and the Mosaic Law—as the proud insignia of their superiority. Not to insist upon them, to treat them as of small account, was to divest themselves of what they had considered their highest distinction.

When they became Christians they were reluctant to think that they were any the less Jews. They still went up to the feasts, they observed the customs of their fathers as before. Old habit seemed stronger than new opportunity for Christian work.

One of the hardest lessons for men to learn is to unlearn, and act contrary to early impressions and convictions. They become part of the mental and spiritual structure, and often enter into their daily habits of thought and life, from which it is impossible to break away.

Now although the apostles through force of habit and education continued to observe the national customs, they would not bind other men to do the same. Peter exclaimed "Now therefore why tempt ye God to put a yoke upon the neck of these disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?"

The result was that the assembled council came to the conclusion already recorded, that only necessary things should be insisted upon as important.

It is strange that this decision of tolerance, so clearly stated and put upon permanent record, should have been ever forgotten. The intolerance and controversies which have resulted from losing sight of it have been the bane and disgrace of Christianity. The greatest names have been at fault here. An old divine says, "Whilst we wrangle here in the dark, we are dying and passing to that world which will decide all controversies; the safest passages thither is by peaceable righteousness."

*If a catholicity of charity and tolerance be open to the suspicion of laxity of faith, it avoids the greater reproach of intolerance.* Baxter said, "I would as willingly be a martyr for charity as for faith." But true faith is not impaired by charity and tolerance. It is rather strengthened, since the zeal that is otherwise consumed or unessential points is thereby concentrated upon those that are vital.

Notice the spirit of the decision. They did not say, "We don't require you to be circumcised, but we do require you to abstain from things strangled." But the essence of the decision seems to be: "Are you not willing, out of gratitude for this great and free salvation, to abstain from certain things that offend the brethren." I have often thought that these older brethren that professed so much greater knowledge, were the biggest babies for being "offended" at that which did not amount to any thing. But so, I suppose it will always be.

The reason for enjoining abstinence from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, is not so plain. It may be supposed that, as the Jewish Christians were not to insist upon their Gentile brethren receiving circumcision and keeping the Mosaic Law, so it was thought proper that the latter should abstain from these meats in difference to Jewish prejudice,—the obligation to do so being one of charity rather than one of morality. Thus the subject is treated by Paul in 1 Cor. 8th chapter.

So we see that the first council meeting was forced upon the church by "offended" brethren, and the apostles "settled" the matter by requiring an exercise of charity on both sides. And the decision was not so "mandatory" either. If all councils and conferences were moved by the same spirit, what an immense amount of heart-achings and ill-feeling would have been saved. Some of us have passed through the crucible, and know how

determined and uncharitable these "offended" brethren act. May the Lord keep us from another experience of the same nature.

## International Sunday School Lessons.

BY REV. F. B. HARGREAVES.

Lesson 9.

August 29th.

JESUS COMFORTING HIS DISCIPLES.

John 14, 1-14. Golden Text, John 14, : 1. Time and Place, same as last lesson.

We are still in the upper room at Jerusalem. The scene becomes more touching and affecting. Christ sees his speedy arrest and crucifixion, with clear vision; the disciples have a vague apprehension of coming disaster.

They have just heard the warnings given to Judas and Peter, and in the presence of approaching sorrow they were naturally depressed. Jesus comes to their relief.

He says, "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in Me." Oh, how sweetly these beautiful words have come to the burdened hearts of humanity in all ages, as his people have learnt to lay their sorrows upon him who was "acquainted with grief, and who never yet turned away the anxious sufferer."

He gives to His disciples, and through them to the world, comfort through believing in Him, and also through the knowledge of a home beyond this life.

He assures them that in his Father's house there is room for all His followers.

There are "many mansions" prepared for His people, and He tells them he will come again, by His resurrection, the descent of the Spirit, His abiding in our hearts quickening us into the higher life, by His second advent, by all these He promises to come again and gather His children home.

Then He tells them that he is "the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me." Men have tried at different periods of the world's history to find a way for themselves.

They have professed to find it in this or that plan; but Christ says distinctly "No man cometh unto the Father but by Me."

Having thus given them comfort through believing in Him, and from the fact of a heavenly home being provided for them; having declared Himself to be the only true and living Way by which this home can be reached, He proceeds to assure them that, thus believing, they shall do the works that He did; and greater works than these shall "they" do.

And He promises to answer their prayers offered in His name, "that the Father may be glorified in the Son."

What sweet and ennobling consolation all this was to the anxious hearts of the disciples; and how magnificently have the words already been verified.

On the day of Pentecost more people were converted than in all of Christ's ministry. "Greater works than these shall ye do," said Jesus. And the work has already gone forward until, in 1880, there were four hundred million people under Christian government.

And ever since that eventful night the words of our lesson have been a heritage of comfort and peace to the followers of Jesus.

## LESSON THOUGHTS.

1. What a Friend we have in Jesus.
2. There is a home for us in heaven, if we trust in Jesus, who is the Way.
3. There is work to do for Jesus.
4. Pray in the name of Jesus.

You picture to yourself the beauty of bravery and steadfastness. You let your memory wander over in memory of martyrs who have died for truth.

And, then, some little, wretched, disagreeable duty comes which is your martyrdom, the lamp for your oil, and if you will not do it, how your oil is spilt! How flat and thin and unilluminated your sentiment about the martyrs runs out over your self indulgence!—*Phillips Brooks.*

Loss which leads us nearer God is gain.